PAINTINGS BY MORRIS LOUIS

Morris Louis was born Morris Bernstein in 1912 in Baltimore. He died of lung cancer in Washington, D.C., at age 49.

Louis was apparently an artist--like Cezanne--who worked best away from the great centers of avant-garde art. His visits to New York from Washington, where he lived, were infrequent. While this may account in part for the slowness of his development as an artist and no little wasted effort (represented by destroyed canvases), it may also be responsible for the uniqueness and integrity of his "style."

He developed a method of using acrylic paints applied thinly as stains to the unsized surface of cotton canvas. He was not the first to use this technique – both Jackson Pollock and Helen Frankenthaler used it earlier – but to a large extent the whole character of his painting depends on it. According to Clement Greenberg, in the spring of 1953 Noland and Louis visited New York and were taken to Helen Frankenthaler's studio by Greenberg where they saw one of her recent paintings, *Mountains and Sea*, which had been painted with such thinly-applied stains of color. Both artists were impressed, and Louis abruptly changed direction in his own painting. In addition to Frankenthaler's canvas, however, he was also impressed with certain canvases of Pollock's with thinly-stained colors. Pollock, however, applied the medium in a linear way. Even where the pigment was spread out, the impression is usually that it was applied with a single motion of the arm. While the same is true of some of Louis' works--the stripes particularly--the only movement that can be inferred is one that has been thought out beforehand and is carefully controlled, as opposed to Pollock's spontaneous and irregular movements. Most of Louis' earlier canvases, particularly the "veils" and "floral" compositions, are made up of broadly-stained irregular shapes rather than wide lines.

Until the New York visit, Louis had been a highly skilled but derivative and provincial artist. In 1954 he emerged as an independent painter "speaking with his own tongue." From this point on his style evolved through several distinct periods. His first fully mature paintings from 1954 are of a type that has come to be called "veils"; he destroyed almost his entire production of 1955 and returned to painting "veils" in 1958; during 1959 he began doing "floral" compositions and "twined columns"; in 1960, "unfurleds" and what are variously called "columns," "pillars," and "stripes." In all of these the paint was applied thinly, stained into the canvas, creating the peculiar "soft" color effects that have come to be particularly associated with this artist's work.

Like Noland, Gottlieb, Neuman, Rothko, and some other painters, including even Monet, he used the same general "image"[1] again and again only varying the colors and with minor changes of shapes and relations of parts. As in Monet's paintings of his lily pond and the mature canvases of Pollock, Neuman, and Rothko, the pigment spreads across the canvas (in Louis' case locking in with the areas of bare surface) to create a single unified "image."[2] Traditional methods--including Cubism--of defining separate forms in terms of planes of light and shade and creating an illusion of space by relating these in terms of perspective have been completely given up. The sensation of space is evoked only by means of overlapping translucent layers of paint and the relations established between different colors, including the bare white canvas. In his earliest mature works, done during the middle fifties, the colored areas overlap and interpenetrate to form a unified image within the borders of the canvas. Three irregular edges of canvas are usually left bare while the image extends all the way to the fourth side to stand on what acts as a base. The white edges are invariably integrated with the colored shapes to the extent that they are a visually interesting element of the composition sharing the same character as the rest of the design. However, they still function as a background for the multi-colored figure where the major action (aesthetically speaking) is taking place.

Libation, done in 1959, presents shapes of muffled tones extending upward on the picture plane, creating a counterpoint of colored and white areas. At the same time, the thin pigment on unsized canvas bleeds off ever so slightly producing a subtle yet definite fusion of the two different areas. Each of the extended "fingers" has a different color character, going from dark grayed blue violet on the left to lighter grayed reddish violet, to greenish gray, and finally to a narrow finger of grayed bluish violet and one of cold blue united by an underlying (or overlapping) gray shape. Each of these areas is developed with thin stains of color applied one over the other to create richness of tone and the illusion of depth. The technique is similar to transparent water-color painting. Louis actually allows the paint to run, suggesting a kind of "rain" of color descending in streams onto the curved base shape. The suggestion of pouring liquid is reenforced by the title.

The relationship between this composition and *Twined Columns II* is clear. In the latter painting the vertical shapes have been reduced to two; the stains of color have been confined to curving ribbons of color; and the large multi-colored shapes extend completely across the surface of the canvas from top to bottom. Thus, the suggestion of a ground plane, which is present in the earlier works, has been given up carrying with it the illusion of space, gravity, and objects related to the ground and to space. One of the significant results is that the white areas of canvas take a place on the same plane as the

[1] The word image as it is used here refers to the over-all configuration of the composition, for example: the "floral" image, the "veil" image, the "vertical stripes," etc.

[2] This is usually referred to as "field painting."

colored figures thus emphasizing the flat surface of the canvas. At the same time, however, the overlapping, curving bands of translucent color paradoxically create an illusion of space. The stripes twist across one another almost like flutings on baroque columns--an allusion once again reenforced by the title.

The two columns are somewhat different in character. The one on the left is slightly broader and warmer in color. Both have bands of yellow and green, but the left-hand one also has ribbons of red and violet while the one on the right counter-balances these with a single band of blue. (Since red and blue together produce violet, a certain visual "tension" is produced relating the columns across the intervening white area.) In general, the left-hand column seems to be more aggressive, due to its larger size, greater number of colors, and warmer tone and also due to the strong curve of its inside contour toward the opposite column and to the relatively strong contrast between the white area and the violet hue of this band. The dominant curve of the right-hand column--particularly the pronounced backward swing of the blue band--suggests a recessive movement. This is somewhat reenforced by the inner band of light yellow which makes an easy transition from the white area to darker colored areas behind it. Thus, the right column takes on a negative and receptive character in contrast to the more aggressive masculine character of that on the left.

Louis dealt with formal problems in this composition not unlike those faced by painters of such traditional subjects as *The Annunciation*. The most obvious differences being that the traditional painters were able to bring into play literary elements concerning the subject while Louis could be more arbitrary and could concentrate on pure color, shapes, values, edges of shapes, the character of the surface, and so on.

In the same year--1960--that he painted *Twined Columns*, Louis began to do his familiar vertically striped compositions. With these canvases he carried clarity and order a step farther. The ribbons of color were straightened out and arranged side by side in vertical bands to create columns precisely placed on the white ground. His canvases were normally left unstretched until after they were painted when their size and proportions were explicitly calculated for stretching and framing. The regularity of size, character, and spacing of the colored bands clearly suggests careful planning and control. The irregularity and seemingly accidental effects of some earlier works have been resolved through an evolution ending with compositions of clarity and precision.

In all Louis' mature works the thin stains of color leave the weave of the canvas visible. There is thus no textural variation from the colored areas to the unpainted canvas thus assuring one's awareness of a single flat surface. On the other hand, the relationships established among the contiguous bands of color do suggest movements of various distances out from the surface of the canvas. Thus, a sense of space and movement as well as an awareness of the flat surface all occur simultaneously.

In the last days before he died Louis left exact instructions for the stretching and hanging of three of his striped canvases as diagonal compositions. One of these is

Hot Half. More clearly than with any of the other kinds of composition, the white areas function as elements equal in significance to the colored areas. The interrelations of colors, including the white areas, are so subtly calculated and precisely balanced that the entire canvas can only be regarded as a single, unified field. Finally, it is the organization of this field by means of colored bands into a precise expression of radiance and grace that I take to have been the artist's purpose.

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Aleph Series I, acrylic on canvas, 105 x 144 inches, 1960,
Collection Andre Emmerich Gallery, New York

Hot Half, acrylic on canvas, 63–1/8 x 63–1/8 inches, 1962,
Collection Marcella Louis Brenner, Washington, D.C.

Kappa, acrylic on canvas, 102–1/2 x 100–3/4 inches, 1960
Collection Andre Emmerich Gallery, New York

Libation, acrylic on canvas, 98 x 144 inches, 1959,
Collection Andre Emmerich Gallery, New York

Twined Columns II, acrylic on canvas, 102–1/2 x 140 inches, 1960–61,
Collection Marcella Louis Brenner, Washington, D.C.

2–07, acrylic on canvas, 94–1/2 x 69–1/2 inches, 1961–62
Collection Andre Emmerich Gallery, New York

2–63, acrylic on canvas, 82–1/2 x 41 inches, 1962, Private Collection

2–76, acrylic on canvas, 84–1/2 x 27–3/4 inches, 1962,
Collection Marcella Louis Brenner, Washington, D.C.

3–05, acrylic on canvas, 92 x 67 inches, 1960, Collection
Andre Emmerich Gallery, New York

43, acrylic on canvas, 87–3/4 x 11–1/4 inches, 1962, Collection
Andre Emmerich Gallery, New York

Some of the works in this exhibition are for sale.
For further information please call Extension 331.